

LITERATURE, METAPHOR, AND THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNER

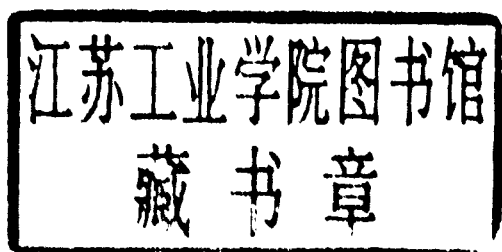
Jonathan D. Picken



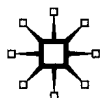
Literature, Metaphor, and the Foreign Language Learner

Jonathan D. Picken

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1

Introduction

1.1 Reading a poem

Sometime around 1988, two literary experts agreed to sit down and read a poem by Gerald Manley Hopkins that they had never read before. Not only did they read it, they also wrote down their thoughts as they progressed through the poem line by line. The poem was 'Inversnaid', and this is how it begins:

This darksome burn, horseback brown,
His rollrock highroad roaring down

Sometimes, the experts' notes record comprehension problems. For example, one of them wonders whether 'His' in line 2 refers back to 'burn' in line 1. They also notice figurative language in many places and ponder ways of interpreting this. They both notice a metaphor in line 1, for example, and wonder why the poem makes this comparison between a burn and a horseback: Does this metaphor suggest speed, or does it suggest the smoothness of a horse's back, and does the horse's dark, brown colour possibly suggest death? As the experts get close to the end of the poem, they respond in an increasingly evaluative manner. One of them feels that the writing is becoming 'a bit loose' and the other exclaims 'Oh boy!' in apparent dismay at the way things are unfolding. The complete narrative of these experts' voyage through the poem is recorded for posterity in Short and van Peer (1989).

Short and van Peer's literary expertise is reflected in the high quality of their commentary on 'Inversnaid'. At the same time, their reading notes are also a record of the normal kinds of response that a literary text is supposed to evoke: Careful reading is necessary to comprehend

the text, figurative language is noticed and frequently interpreted in considerable detail, and evaluation takes place. These responses also come up again and again in arguments for work with literature. Some argue that students can develop their interpretative and critical thinking skills by reading literature, while others emphasize evaluation and the idea that the literary reading experience can be powerful and of great personal value. Arguments of the former kind are closely associated with stylistics, while value-related arguments are more frequently found in publications inspired by the reader-response school of thought. In L2 teaching, these arguments are also placed in a broader context and related to language learning or motivation. For example, it is argued that L2 readers will be motivated to read literature because of its value and its power to move people.

The arguments are often sophisticated and persuasive, but language teachers may well have their doubts. Will the teenagers in their classes be able to make any sense at all of poems written in a foreign language? Even if they understand that a poem contains a comparison between a burn and a horse, will they care either way whether this conveys a sense of speed or an impression of smoothness? Will they value the reading experience, or will they just sigh and exclaim 'Oh boy!' whenever the teacher trots out a poem for their benefit? I have used literature in my own EFL classes since the beginning of my teaching career at a Dutch secondary school, where literature was a required subject, and I have certainly faced questions of this nature on more than one occasion.

The importance of theoretical arguments for work with literature is undeniable, but theory alone is not enough. Theory-based assertions need to be investigated to establish whether they have any basis in reality: Does work with literature really help students to become better interpreters? Do they really value reading and responding to literary texts and if so, why do they do this? Calls for research of this nature are often heard (see Hall, 2005; Maley, 2001; Paran, 2006b), but rarely heeded. The main purpose of the present book is to begin to fill this regrettable research gap by trying to find answers to basic questions like the above in one particular context, and by showing how research of this nature can be used to inform teaching theory and practice. In the process, I hope that it will also serve as a stimulus for much-needed further research.

1.2 Literature and literary theory

One unfortunate byproduct of writing about literature is that literature has to be defined at some point, and this can result in lengthy

and involved discussions. Literary theory is mainly to blame for this: Eagleton (1996), in particular, spends a happy time demolishing other people's attempts to define and delimit literature in a way that is 'eternally given and immutable' (p. 9). For example, he points out that literature inevitably changes over time as once-acclaimed writers quietly disappear from the literary canon because nobody cares to write about them any longer. He also shows that no single quality of literary writing adequately manages to define it either. Literature may often be fictional, for example, but not all of it is (biographies and essays, for instance), and many fictional texts are by no means literary. Problems aside, Eagleton is happy to accept at least one thing about literature: It is 'a highly valued kind of writing' (p. 9).

The idea that literature is valued writing will also be adopted in this book, but it immediately raises an obvious question: How does literature get its value? A considerable variety of answers can be found in the writings of literary theoreticians, but in publications on literature in foreign language teaching, two answers are common. One answer, it might be said, emphasizes signification, while the other is more concerned with personal significance. Stylistics is closely associated with signification or the idea that literature derives its value from a symbolic interpretation of the carefully crafted patterns of words in a text. Reader response is more likely to emphasize the personal significance that may be discovered in the course of a responsive reading of the words in the text.

The role of interpretation is one thing that these two pedagogical approaches to literature appear to disagree about most. Stylistically oriented practitioners like Widdowson (1986) view interpretation as central to the value of literature. Lyric poetry illustrates this point particularly well because, as Widdowson points out, the propositional content of these poems is often so banal: 'I sit by the sea and feel miserable. I listen to the nightingale and reflect on mortality' (p. 133). However, a close attention to the associative overtones of the words in these poems will often reveal a deeper symbolic or metaphorical significance. When readers manage to interpret a poem in this kind of way, they will be able to overcome their initial 'So what?' (Widdowson, p. 133) response to the poem's apparently trivial propositional content. In contrast, reader-response proponents tend to be rather negative about interpretation. According to this view, an intellectual emphasis on form and interpretation is likely to stand in the way of other responses that a whole person may aspire to—notably responses of an affective kind. Indeed, Miall (2006) suggests that the neglect of affective responses in literature

teaching may well be causing readers to turn away from both literature and literary study: 'In our classrooms we may too persistently have called on readers to marginalize their personal experience of literary texts in order to participate in the game of interpretation' (p. 24). This does not mean that reader response necessarily rules out interpretation. Rosenblatt (1994) accepts this as a valid response but also sees it as one that should not be engaged in until the reader has had the opportunity to savour the reading experience itself, the 'web of feelings, images and ideas' (p. 137) that readers draw out from the web of words in the text.

It is important to be aware of the distinction between stylistics and reader response because it provides a basis for understanding substantially different teaching practices in work with literature. At the same time it is also important not to exaggerate the differences. The words on the page of the literary text remain essential in both approaches—either as the starting point for interpretative work or as the trigger for an affective, evaluative response. Because of this, it also becomes possible to relate both of them to an old and venerable literary theory: Foregrounding theory. Details of this theory will be discussed in the following chapter, but the basic idea is this: Literary texts use words in unusual ways, and this foregrounds the wording. Readers are slowed down as they pay attention to the foregrounded words, and this gives them an opportunity to think about their meaning and to respond to them in an affective manner. Short and van Peer's (1989) responses to 'Inversnaid' illustrate this nicely (see above). The unusual wording of the poem's first line draws their attention and makes them think about the possible meanings of 'This darksome burn, horseback brown', and as they make their way through the poem, their responses become increasingly evaluative.

Although foregrounding is an old theory, its influence remains strong. In fact, recent theoretical work has revitalized foregrounding by bringing it up to date and relating it to developments in linguistics, especially cognitive linguistics. Cook (1994) and Semino (1997) have been at the forefront of this development by showing how foregrounding theory can be understood and reformulated with reference to schema theory. In this reformulation, foregrounding is said to have a 'schema refreshing' effect on our thoughts and feelings—it can, in small or large ways, change the way we think and feel. One nice thing about this work is that its importance is recognized by stylisticians and reader-response advocates alike. Stockwell (2002) devotes a chapter to it in his stylistically oriented book on cognitive poetics, and Miall (2006) does the same in his recent book on empirical research of literature within the

reader-response paradigm. Thus, foregrounding and its recent cognitive offshoots appear to provide an excellent basis for theory and research that is relevant to both approaches to literature.

1.3 Literature and empirical research

Frustration with literary theory has been a major driving force behind the emergence of the empirical study of literature. Literary theory, it is felt, has given rise to endless numbers of texts about how readers may be supposed to arrive at their responses to literature, but it has majestically kept its distance from the hands-on research effort that would be necessary to support the armchair theory. Initially, it took courage to take on this firmly embedded discipline, but empirical poetics is now well established as a discipline in its own right, and it has the scholarly societies (notably IGEL) and journals (such as *Poetics*) to show for this. Steen (2003) offers an informed and thought-provoking history of the discipline and of IGEL's development since its first conference in 1987.

While literary theory is often criticized by empirical researchers, it remains important as a source of ideas for research. Foregrounding is one literary theory that has provided the theoretical basis for a large number of important studies. In some cases, foregrounding is the sole basis for a research project (van Peer, 1986, for example). Other studies are of a comparative nature. As Hanauer (2001c) puts it, these studies tend to compare the 'language-driven' (p. 108) theory of foregrounding with 'genre theory' (p. 106), that is, the view that our responses to literature are largely determined by the way in which education and society have trained us to respond to it. Many of these studies will be discussed in the following chapter.

With very few exceptions, empirical studies of literature have used native speakers as subjects for research. In some cases when L2 subjects have been used, the researchers have simply treated them as expert readers, ignoring L2 language skill as a potentially relevant research factor (Goodblatt, 2001, for example). Fortunately, the number of studies on L2 reading of literature continues to grow, but major gaps remain. Thus, little is known about whether foregrounding also works as a theory of literary response for L2 readers of literature: Does foregrounding also slow down the reading of L2 readers, guide their interpretations, and give rise to affective responses among them? The discussion of research in later chapters of the book is centrally concerned with these questions.

My own research has mainly investigated L2 readers' responses to metaphor in literature. In addition to allowing for a focused discussion, the book's highlighting of metaphor has at least two advantages. First, as Steen and Gibbs (2004) put it recently, foregrounding is 'pre-eminently represented by metaphor' (p. 341). Other things are involved too, of course, notably foregrounded patterns of language (rhyme, alliteration), but one thing should be clear: Foregrounding theory would be in serious trouble if its predictions turn out not to work in the case of metaphor. Thus, research on metaphor in literature is a central aspect of research on foregrounding in literature. The second advantage is that there is a massive body of research on metaphor and metaphor processing to refer to. This is often research with L1 subjects, but metaphor has been gaining an increasing amount of attention in L2 research. Thus, the focus on metaphor makes it possible to make broad connections with these developments in psycholinguistics and applied linguistics. This would be much less the case with research on foregrounded patterns of language, for example. This being said, the book certainly aims to provide a thorough coverage of work on foregrounding in general. Chapter 2 covers this work in considerable detail in order to provide background for the remaining chapters, which are mainly concerned with metaphor.

1.4 Background to the research

Specifics regarding the background to individual studies will be provided as the need arises in later chapters, but general comments on the materials and on the students involved in the studies are worth making at this point. With regard to the materials, it is necessary to explain and motivate my selections of texts. This is mainly related to validity: When conducting research on responses to literature, it is necessary to select texts that have a valid claim to a literary status. In other words, the texts have to be demonstrably valued as literature. Two of my selections pass this test with flying colours: These are poems by Robert Frost that have been widely commented on by literary specialists. However, the two very short stories that I used are less canonical: 'Carpathia' (1996) by Jesse Lee Kercheval, and 'Night' (1992) by Bret Lott. Nevertheless, a reasonable case can be made for choosing them. First, it is reasonable to claim a literary status for the writers of these stories because both Kercheval and Lott are published novelists. Secondly, the stories themselves have a degree of literary status that derives from the fact that literary experts selected them for inclusion in anthologies: The stories

were taken from two anthologies of very short stories that were put together by university teachers of English. The editors of one of these anthologies even used evaluation ratings in the story-selection process: Students and 'literary friends' (Thomas, 1992, p. 12) were asked to evaluate the stories on a 10-point scale for this purpose. Finally, stories from one of these collections have also been used in other empirical research on literary reading (Kurtz & Schober, 2001).

While validity was an essential issue in the selection process, practical considerations also played an important role. The texts had to be short to ensure that the studies would not take up too much time. The linguistic challenges posed by the texts had to be considered because I needed texts that my students would be able to read without consulting their dictionaries: In some cases, dictionaries could have helped them to interpret metaphors in the texts, and I wanted to ensure that this did not become a factor in my research. Finally, because of my focus on metaphor in literature, metaphor itself played a significant role in the selections. All texts arguably end with important metaphors that I could focus on in my studies.

It is also necessary to say something about the students involved in the studies. I worked with students in classes that I was teaching, and this limits the generalizability of the findings. First, this is limited by the fact that the students were in so-called 'intact' groups—that is, in classes that they had been placed in—because the composition of such groups may not be fully random. Secondly, there are demographic limitations with regard to age, gender, nationality, and English proficiency: I teach female Japanese students in their late teens and early twenties at a liberal arts college with a well-established reputation for the quality of its English programme. These demographic limitations have to be recognized from the outset. At the same time, it is also important to emphasize that my discussion still remains rooted in the experiences of real readers. As a result, it certainly serves as a 'reality check' on literary theory with its abstract claims about how 'the reader' is supposed to respond in the course of her or his encounters with literary texts.

1.5 Organization of the book

Before discussing the details, it is worth drawing attention to an organizational pattern that recurs in the book. This is related to different stages in the processing of literature and metaphor in literature: comprehension, interpretation, and evaluation. These stages can be seen in foregrounding theory: Foregrounded language is supposed to slow down